

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-16

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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5479

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S CALL ON PRIME MINISTER

1. SUMMARY: IN MY CALL ACCOMPANIED BY DCM ON PRIME MINISTER NUIRA MAY 13, BEFORE RETURNING TO U.S. FOR CONSULTATION, WE DISCUSSED VARIOUS FACETS OF US-TUNISIAN RELATIONSHIP. NOUIRA STRESSED THAT TUNISIA CONTINUES TO ATTACH HIGHEST IMPORTANCE TO ITS CLOSE RELATIONS WITH U.S. WHILE APPRECIATING REASONS FOR REDUCTION IN U.S. ASSISTANCE TO TUNISIA, PRIME MINISTER QUERIED WHETHER U.S. PERCEPTIONS OF ITS INTERESTS IN TUNISIA HAD CHANGED. AMBASSADOR REPLIED THAT TUNISIA REMAINS IMPORTANT TO U.S. IN RECOGNITION OF IDEALS AND INTERESTS IN COMMON BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES. PRIME MINISTER SAID GOT IS "JEALOUS OF ITS INDEPENDENCE", AND EXPRESSED CONFIDENCE IN TUNISIA'S POLITICAL SURVIVABILITY AND ECONOMIC VIABILITY. END SUMMARY.

2. I TOLD PRIME MINISTER THAT I WOULD BE HAPPY TO DISCUSS IN WASHINGTON ANY SUBJECTS WHICH HE MIGHT WISH TO RAISE. I SAW NO PROBLEMS IN U.S.-TUNISIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS AND EXPRESSED VIEW THAT THIS RELATIONSHIP
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CONTINUES TO BE SOUNDLY BASED. WHILE OUR ECONOMIC

ASSISTANCE HAS DIMINISHED, THIS IS A FUNCTION OF REDUCED AID RESOURCES ON A GLOBAL BASIS, AS WELL AS A REFLECTION OF TUNISIA'S GREATER ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY. IT INVOLVES NO CHANGE IN POLITICAL RELATIONSHIP. OUR MILITARY ASSISTANCE IS EXPECTED TO CONTINUE ALTHOUGH WE ARE SHIFTING IN THE NEAR FUTURE FROM GRANT AID TO FMS CREDIT. ON LATTER POINT, PRIME MINISTER NODDED HIS HEAD, SUGGESTING HE WAS ALREADY INFORMED. I EMPHASIZED THAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR WAYS TO INCREASE AMERICAN PRIVATE SECTOR PARTICIPATION IN TUNISIA AS A PARTIAL OFFSET TO REDUCED USG INPUT. IN THIS REGARD, I RECALLED PRIME MINISTER'S RECENT REMARKS ALONG THESE LINES TO OPIC DIRECTOR MAYS.

3. PRIME MINISTER SAID HE FULLY UNDERSTOOD THAT REDUCTION IN AID LEVELS DOES NOT RPT NOT CHANGE NATURE OF CLOSE U.S.-TUNISIAN RELATIONSHIP. FRIENDSHIP IS NOT DEPENDENT UPON UPS AND DOWNS OF ASSISTANCE. WHATEVER HAPPENS, TUNISIA WOULD CONTINUE TO ATTACH THE HIGHEST IMPORTANCE TO THIS RELATIONSHIP. NEVERTHELESS, HE SAID HE WOULD BE INTERESTED IN KNOWING WHETHER THE U.S. HAD DOUBTS CONCERNING THE FUTURE POLITICAL VIABILITY OF TUNISIA AND HOW TUNISIA FITS INTO OVERALL U.S. INTERESTS. SOME PERSONS "WHO HAVE NOTHING ELSE TO DO" HAD BEEN SPECULATING IN THIS REGARD. HE NOTED THAT RECENTLY AN AMBASSADOR HAD ASKED HIM POINT BLANK WHETHER HE THOUGHT TUNISIA COULD SURVIVE AS AN INDEPENDENT POLITICAL ENTITY, SQUEEZED AS IT IS BETWEEN DYNAMIC ALGERIA AND OIL-RICH LIBYA.

4. I SAID THAT I WAS NOT AWARE OF ANY USG QUESTIONING OF FUTURE POLITICAL VIABILITY OF TUNISIA. CLOSE STUDY OF TUNISIAN HISTORY SHOWS THAT TUNISIA HAS BEEN SELF-CONTAINED UNIT LONGER THAN ITS NEIGHBORS AND HAD PRESERVED A POLITICAL PERSONALITY OVER THE CENTURIES DESPITE A SUCCESSION OF FOREIGN INCURSIONS. SPEAKING PERSONALLY, I SAID THAT WHILE RECOGNIZING THE DIFFICULTY OF PREDICTING THE FUTURE, I HAD FULL CONFIDENCE THAT TUNISIA WOULD CONTINUE TO SURVIVE AS A POLITICAL ENTITY. IN ANY CASE, I THOUGHT INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION CURRENTLY BEING

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FOCUSSED ON SMALL NATIONS MADE AGGRESSION AGAINST SUCH NATIONS LESS EASY THAN IT USED TO BE.

5. RE U.S. INTERESTS IN TUNISIA, I REFERRED TO THEM AS STRATEGIC, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC. I SAID THAT WHILE OUR ORIGINAL RELATIONSHIP WITH BOURGUIBA DEVELOPED TO AN EXTENT OUT OF COMMON IDEALS, THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN TANGIBLE INTERESTS IN COMMON BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES.

THESE INCLUDED PRESERVING TUNISIA'S INDEPENDENCE. WHILE IT COULD BE ARGUED THAT TUNISIA WAS MORE IMPORTANT TO U.S. IN NORTH AFRICAN CONTEXT WHEN NASSER AND BEN BELLA WERE IN POWER, U.S. ATTITUDES AND POLICIES TOWARD STAUNCH FRIENDS ARE CONSTANT AND NOT RPT NOT FICKLE. TUNISIA REMAINS IMPORTANT TO THE U.S.M

6. PRIME MINISTER SAID THAT TUNISIANS ARE "JEALOUS OF THEIR INDEPENDENCE" AND WILL TENACIOUSLY HOLD ONTO IT. IN HIS VIEW, POLITICAL SURVIVABILITY OF TUNISIA IS NOT RPT NOT AT ISSUE. ECONOMIC VIABILITY, WHICH MIGHT HAVE ONCE BEEN AT ISSUE, NO LONGER IS -- ALTHOUGH TUNISIA IS NOT RPT NOT AS WELL-ENDOWED ECONOMICALLY AS SOME OTHER NATIONS. AT SAME TIME TUNISIA WILL WORK TOWARD A CLOSER POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION WITH OTHER MAGHREBIAN STATES. SUCH A REGIONAL ASSOCIATION IS CONSISTENT WITH CURRENT WORLD TRENDS, AND IS IN THE INTERESTS OF MAGHREBIAN STATES. PRIME MINISTER STRESSED, HOWEVER, THAT IN THE PROCESS TUNISIA WOULD NOT GIVE UP HER SOVEREIGNTY.

7. AS WE TOOK LEAVE, PRIME MINISTER DISCOUNTED POSSIBILITY OF HIS TAKING LEAVE THIS SUMMER BECAUSE OF PREPARATIONS NECESSARY FOR UPCOMING PARTY CONGRESS AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS.

8. COMMENT: NOUIRA WAS CORDIAL AND RELAXED. ONLY CURIOUS NOTE WAS HIS QUERY WHETHER USG HAD ANY DOUBTS ABOUT TUNISIA'S FUTURE. QUESTION WAS OBLIQUELY PUT AND BASIS FOR IT WAS UNEXPLAINED EXCEPT AS RESPONSE TO MY OFFER TO CONVEY TO DEPARTMENT WHILE ON CONSULTATION ANY THOUGHTS HE HAD. THAT HE WAS SEEKING SOME KIND OF REASSURANCE THAT WE BELIEVED IN TUNISIA'S FUTURE WAS CLEAR ENOUGH. LESS
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CLEAR WAS WHY HE POSED THE QUESTION AT ALL. I CAN ONLY SURMISE THAT MY UNNAMED COLLEAGUE'S QUESTION TOUCHED A SENSITIVE NERVE IN WAKE OF JANUARY'S ABORTIVE DJERBA DECLARATION OF UNITY WITH LIBYA AND THAT HE WANTED TO BE SURE THAT WE DID NOT SHARE SAME DOUBT IMPLICIT IN QUESTION. WHETHER MY COMMENTS ABOUT DECLINING LEVELS OF AID AS WELL AS CONTINUED UNCERTAINTY OF PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S VISIT TO U.S. (SEPTTEL) CONTRIBUTED TO HIS POSING QUESTION, I COULD NOT TELL. AT ANY RATE, HE SEEMED SATISFIED AND DID NOT PRESS MATTER AFTER I ASSURED HIM THAT I KNEW OF NO ONE IN USG WHO HAD VOICED ANY DOUBTS.
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